

Air Force Public Affairs Fact Paper on ISR and Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS)

Innovation and an aggressive effort to increase ISR capability for the warfighter are at the forefront of Air Force objectives. The Air Force Chief of Staff established a Deputy at the 3-star level for ISR efforts in 2006. Since that time the Air Force has led the Department of Defense (DoD) in increasing its focus on ISR capability. For example, the DoD official requirement for MQ-1 Predator program capability is to stand up 21 Combat Air Patrols (CAP) by 2010. The Air Force has accelerated that timeline by over two years and with greater numbers—today, 21 Apr 2008, we have 23 CAPs in Afghanistan and Iraq with 4 more scheduled to deliver by Dec 08. AF plans are to continue to dynamically add combat capability as equipment, personnel and communications infrastructure allow. General Petraeus, and the commander of special operations forces in Southwest Asia just recently lauded as magnificent the efforts of AF UAS operations.

This dramatic growth in Predator capability is enabled by a revolutionary Concept of Operations. Traditional unmanned aircraft deployment concepts put 30-40 % of a system's capability into combat. Over the last four years, the AF has implemented Remote Split Operations (RSO) with its UAS fleet, putting nearly 85% of the system capability directly into today's fight. Under RSO, USAF UAS in the Iraq and Afghanistan are flown by pilots at CONUS bases via SATCOM. This eliminates the need to rotate pilots between deployments enabling the bulk of the force to remain engaged in combat operations, while decreasing the deployed "footprint" and vulnerability of our Servicemen and women to the theater threats.

The AF recently took the initiative to assist the Army by developing and demonstrating the employment of the RSO concept for their Shadow UAS system. Once fully developed, the concept could nearly triple the number of Shadow systems available for the Army to use in their operations.

Recent AF plans also include growth to 50 equivalent MQ-1 CAPs with a far more robust aircraft, the MQ-9 Reaper. In October of 2007, the AF fielded its first MQ-9, with nearly twice the performance of the MQ-1 and nearly 6 times the external payload. This big brother of Predator will replace the current fleet of MQ-1s and deliver a capability that not only brings a larger array of weapons, but also the ability to carry a wider variety of sensors. AF plans now include developing and fielding a new Wide Area Airborne Surveillance (WAAS) sensor to increase the effectiveness of individual CAPs by over 1200% initially and eventually increasing the effectiveness to over 3000% from where we are today with the Predator.

Future AF plans include MQ-1/9 sensor improvements to increase target location accuracy suitable for coordinate seeking weapons such as small diameter bomb. This will allow Predator/Reaper to provide precise targets locations to any aircraft, further shortening the kill chain.

These UAS initiatives are just one aspect of the AF's drive to transform airborne ISR. Last summer, the AF established the AF ISR Agency—an organization of over 500 people dedicated to increasing the focus and effects of ISR. The AF is also increasing the number of general officers assigned to AF ISR organizations in a period of declining total AF personnel. In January, the Chief of Staff realigned the AF Distributed Common Ground Station (DCGS) into a global organization to provide rapid and seamless ISR analysis and distribution from airborne, space, and cyber-based collection to Combatant Commanders around the world. The Air Force is also establishing new centers of excellence for ISR analysis, and targeting; standing up an AF ISR center of excellence at the AF Weapons Center. Collectively, these efforts comprise an aggressive strategy to deliver responsive operationally focused ISR, supporting the needs of our Combatant Commanders.